

HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL EXCURSIONS IN OPERA-LAND

A Tragic Comedy from Real Life

Leoncavallo's "Pagliacci"—Verism in Italian Opera—Inspired by Mascagni's "Cavalleria Rusticana"

—Source of the Plot.

By H. E. KREHBIEL.

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FOR a quarter of a century "Cavalleria Rusticana" and "Pagliacci" have been the Castor and Pollux of the operatic theatres of Europe and America. Together they have joined the hunt of venturesome impresarios for that Calydonian boar, success; together they have lighted the way through seasons of tempestuous stress and storm. Of recent years at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York efforts have been made to divorce them and to find associates for one or the other, since neither is sufficient in time for an evening's entertainment; but they refuse to be put asunder as steadfastly as did the twin brothers of Helen and Clytemnestra. There has been no operatic Zeus powerful enough to separate and alternate their existences even for a day; and though blasphemous critics will continue to rail at the "double bill" as they have done for two decades or more, the two fierce little dramas will "sit shining on the sails" of many a managerial ship and bring it safe to haven for many a year to come.

Twins the operas are in spirit; twins in their capacity as supreme representatives of *verismo*; twins in the fitness of their association; but twins they are not in respect of parentage or age. "Cavalleria Rusticana" is two years older than "Pagliacci" and as truly its progenitor as Weber's operas were the progenitors of Wagner's. They are the offspring of the same artistic movement, and it was the phenomenal success of Mascagni's opera which was the spur that drove Leoncavallo to write his. When "Cavalleria Rusticana" appeared on the scene two generations of opera-goers had passed away without experiencing anything like the sensation caused by this opera. They had witnessed the production, indeed, of great masterpieces, which it would be almost sacrilegious to mention in the same breath with Mascagni's turbulent and torrential tragedy, but these works were the productions of mature masters, from whom things monumental and lasting were expected as a matter of course; men like Wagner and Verdi. The generations had also seen the coming of "Carmina Burana" and gradually opened their minds to an appreciation of its meaning and beauty, while the youthful geniuses who had created it sank almost unnoticed into his grave; but they had not seen the advent of a work which almost in a day set the world on fire and raised an unknown musician from penury and obscurity to affluence and fame. In the face of such an experience it was scarcely to be wondered at that judgment was flung to the winds and that the most volatile of musical nations and the staidest alike hailed the young composer as the successor of Verdi, the regenerator of operatic Italy and the pioneer of a new school which should revolutionize opera and make unnecessary the hopeless task of trying to work along the lines laid down by Wagner.

And this opera was the outcome of a competition based on the frankest kind of commercialism—one of those "occasionals" from which we have been taught to believe we ought never to expect anything of ideal and lasting merit. "Pagliacci" was, in a way, a fruit of the same competition. Three years before "Cavalleria Rusticana" had started the universal conflagration Ruggiero Leoncavallo, who at sixteen years of age had won his diploma at the Naples Conservatory and received the degree of Doctor of Letters from the University of Bologna at twenty, had read his dramatic poem "I Medici" to the publisher Ricordi and been commissioned to set it to music. For this work he was to receive 2,400 francs. He completed the composition within a year, but there was no contract that the opera should be performed, and this hoped-for consummation did not follow. Then came Mascagni's triumph, and Leoncavallo, who had been obliged meanwhile to return to the routine work of an operatic *répétiteur*, lost patience. Satisfied that Ricordi would never do anything more for him, and become desperate, he shut himself in his room to attempt "one more work"—as he said in an autobiographical sketch which appeared in "La Réforme," a journal published in Alexandria. In six months he had written the book and music of "Pagliacci," which was accepted for publication and production by Sonzogno, Ricordi's business rival, after a single reading of the poem. Maurel, whose friendship Leoncavallo had made, while the coaching opera singers in Paris, used his influence in favor of the opera, offered to create the part of Tonio, and did so at the first performance of the opera at the Teatro dal Verme, Milan, on May 17, 1892.

Truth and Fiction in the Story of "Pagliacci."

Leoncavallo's opera turns on a tragic ending to a comedy which is incorporated in the play. The comedy is a familiar one among the strolling players who perform at village fairs in Italy, in which Columbina, Pagliaccio and Arlechino (respectively the Colombine, Clown and Harlequin of our pantomime) take part. Pagliaccio is husband to Columbina and Arlechino is her lover, who hoodwinks Pagliaccio. There is a fourth character, Taddeo, a servant, who makes foolish love to Columbina and, mingling imbecile stupidity with malice, delights in the domestic discord which he helps to foment. The first act of the opera may be looked upon as an induction to the conventional comedy which comes to an unconventional and tragic end through the fact that the Clown (Canio) is in real life the husband of Columbina (Nedda) and is a murderous jealous of her; therefore, forgetting himself in a mad rage, he kills her and her lover in the midst of the mimic scene. The lover, however, is not the Harlequin of the comedy, but one of the spectators whom Canio had vainly sought to identify, but who is unconsciously betrayed by his mistress in her death agony. The Taddeo of the comedy is the clown of the company, who in real life entertains a passion for Nedda, which is repelled, whereas he also carries his part into actuality and betrays Nedda's secret to Canio. It is in the ingenious interweaving of these threads—the web of reality with the warp of simulation—that the chief dramatic value of Leoncavallo's opera lies.

Controversy with Mendes.

Actual murder by a man while apparently playing a part in a drama is older as a dramatic motif than "Pagliacci," and Leoncavallo's employment of it gave rise to an interesting controversy and a still more interesting revelation in the early days of the opera. Old theatregoers in England and America remember the device as it was employed in Dennerby's "Paillasse," known on the English stage as "Belphegor, the Mountebank." In 1874 Paul Ferri-



Caricature of Ruggiero Leoncavallo, Composer of "Pagliacci".

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to the editor of "Le Figaro." Before this was done, however, Signor Cavallo wrote a letter to his publisher, which not only established that the incident in question was based upon fact but directed attention to a dramatic use of the *motif* in a Spanish play written thirty-five years before the occurrence which was in the mind of Leoncavallo. The letter was as follows:

Lugano, Sept. 3, 1894.
Dear Signor Sonzogno,
I have read in *l'Attilio* Mendes's two letters. M. Mendes goes pretty far in declaring *a priori* that "Pagliacci" is an imitation of his "Femme de Tabarin." I had not known this book, and only know it now through the accounts given in the daily papers. You will remember that at the time of the first performance of "Pagliacci" in Milan, in 1892, several critics accused me of having taken the subject of my opera from the "Drama Nuevo" of the well known Spanish writer Estebanez. What would M. Mendes say if he were accused of having taken the plot of "La Femme de Tabarin" from "Drama Nuevo," which date back to 1830 or 1840? At least a half-band of critics can kill the last scent of honor of his wife before her eyes while he only appears to play his part in the piece.

It is absolutely true that I knew at that time no more of the "Drama Nuevo" than I know now of "La Femme de Tabarin." I saw the first mentioned work in Rome represented by Novello six months after "Pagliacci" first production in Milan. In my childhood, while my father was judge at Montalto, in Calabria, in the scene of the opera's plot, I saw my mother and companion, as I saw it, and it can be seen now at the Festival of Madonna della Serra, at Montalto. The clowns arrive a week or ten days before the festival, which takes place on August 15, to put up their tents and booths in the open space which reaches from the church toward the fields. I have not even invented the coming of the peasants from Santo Benedetto, a neighboring village, during the carnival.

What I write now I have mentioned so often in Germany and other parts that several opera houses, notably that of Berlin, had printed on their bills "Scene of the true event." After all this, M. Mendes insisted on his claim, which means that he does not believe words. Had not M. Mendes the same idea about Enrico and before us, in our humor and conscience, I assure you that I have read but two of M. Mendes's books in my life—"Zo Har" and "La Première Matinée." When I read at Marienbad a little while ago the newspaper notices on the production of "La Femme de Tabarin" I even write to you dear Signor Sonzogno, thinking this was an imitation of "Pagliacci." A notice in the paper said that the author was an honorable man, to prove my loyalty. If not, then I will place my undoubted rights under the protection of the law, and furnish incontestable proof of what I have stated here.

I have the honor, etc., etc.

An Actual Occurrence.

At various times and in various manners, by letters and in newspaper interviews, Leoncavallo reiterated the statement that the incident which he had witnessed as a boy in his father's courtroom had suggested his drama. The chief actor in the incident, he said, was still living. After conviction he was asked if he felt penitent. The rough voice which rang through the room years before still echoed in Leoncavallo's ears: "I repent me of nothing! On the contrary, if I had to do over again I'd do it again!" (*Non mi pento del delitto! Tutt' altro. Se dovesse riconoscere, riconoscerà!*) He was sentenced to imprisonment and after the expiration of his term took service in a little Calabrian town with Baroness Sproniere. If Mendes had prosecuted his action "poor Alessandro" was ready to appear as a witness and tell the story which Leoncavallo had dramatized. Her programme will be:

Italian march arrangement by Rubinstein. English solo by Mrs. Ernestine Thompson. Fairy Interlude Preludes by Debussy. Dances by Delibes.

Edwin Hughes, American pianist and teacher, has made an appointment to give a recital Thursday evening, September 28, at the studio of A. Singiliano, 138 West Eighty-eighth Street. He will be accompanied by Miss Edith Moach. The programme follows:

De Berlin Klavier. Deutsches Klavier. Schumann. Brahms. Schubert. Wagners. Antonius. Singiliano. Prokofieva.

News and Notes of the Music World

Wynne Pyle, the young Texas pianist, who made her American debut last season with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra on tour, and who followed this appearance with recitals in New York, Boston and Chicago, will next week play at the Palace Theatre, in a programme of Beethoven, Grämer, Heller and Dohnanyi.

Miss Pyle is an American girl, who studied in Europe, under Harold Bauer and Alberto Jonas. She made her debut with the Blüthner Orchestra in Berlin, and after that played with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as other symphonic organizations.

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